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VIETNAM

The Lansdale file

The monsoon campaign in South Vietnam is ending without the military disasters that had been feared. Our Saigon correspondent describes the next task as he sees it:

MR CABOT LODGE and General Lansdale, the recently returned American ambassador to Saigon and his political pimp, are like two men coming back to the table to find that the same game is being played but the pack has been shuffled and the cards have lost their shine. The military problem is being taken care of, brutally but effectively. The political problem remains.

Americans in the know here in Saigon say that Mr Cabot Lodge's new job is one of "exchanging smiles and hand-shakes." General Lansdale, who operated subtly here once before between 1954 and 1956, has a different task. It is to manoeuvre behind the scenes and muster whatever support and force is required to push through the new American policy. This is to replace Marshal Ky's military "national leadership committee" by a civilian government.

The military junta has talked a great deal, but done little. True, it has not had much time. But the crux of the matter is that, while the United States has no desire to overthrow the communist government in North Vietnam, the war aim of the military junta is to march north, annihilate the communists and reunify the country. Since this is clearly beyond the capabilities of the South Vietnamese army, the Vietnamese generals would have to fight to the last American to achieve it. Washington will have none of such nonsense. In any case, the Vietnamese who helped to overthrow President Diem two years ago are wondering what on earth they achieved. Was the aim simply to replace a civilian dictatorship with a military one? So the first problem for General Lansdale is to unseat the junta without kicking up too much fuss and dirt, and without too much loss of face to the military men—for this is Asia.

He will have to mix pressure and cajolement in the right doses. This means combining threats of a coup by younger officers (and there are plenty of them willing to play the game), with readiness to accept a compromise that would allow the generals to bow out gracefully. It also means using the resources at General Lansdale's disposal—a vast intelligence network, plenty of hard cash, and the presence of American troops—to stop the generals shoving their way back by a counter-coup.

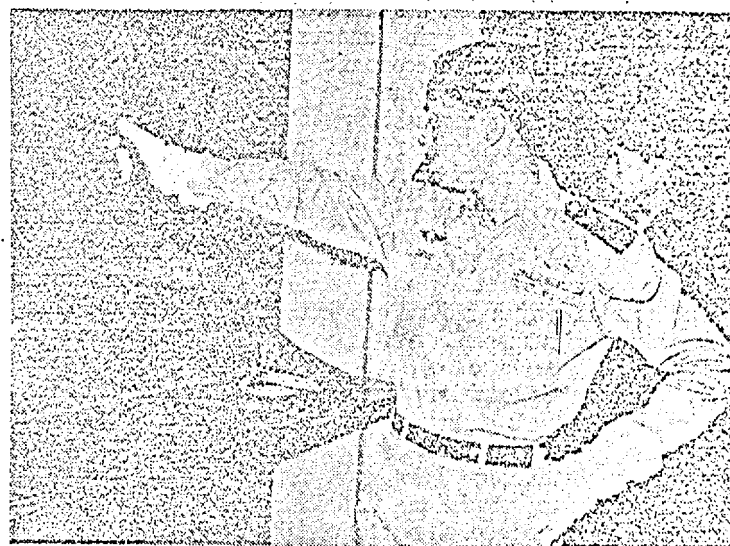
But that is only the first step. The hoped-for civilian government must be one that sticks. This means that it must be led by a man who can unite all the political, religious and other factions round him—or break their power; impose his authority on the army; revitalise a paralysed civil service; and, above all, rekindle courage and enthusiasm among the South Vietnamese, especially those who live in the countryside. Only thus can the Vietcong fish be deprived of the water in which to swim.

Where to find the new leader? The scene around General Lansdale is bleak indeed. The Americans in Saigon agree on one thing: the politicians who opposed President Diem, and from whose ranks it had been hoped that a new national leader would emerge, have made a pretty poor showing in the past two years. It has been a tale of bickering, intrigue, corruption and utter confusion of purposes.

None of them managed to break the power of the religious groups to meddle in state affairs. None of them won the respect of the army. And the generals who then took over have done no better. Little has been done to improve people's standard of life, especially that of the peasants who have been fleeing from their villages by the thousands. There are now 600,000 of them

in the cities; by the end of this year there will be at least a million to feed, house and re-employ.

The economy is in a mess. Prices have been rocketing upwards (7 per cent in July alone). There is a speculation fever in real estate. Rice exports, which used to earn the country \$45 million a year, have dropped to zero this year. The foreign exchange reserves (\$200 million at the end of 1963) have been squandered. The \$4 million spent each month by American troops has landed in the vaults of the foreign banks instead of those of the national bank of Vietnam. To top it all, there is a budget deficit of 46 billion piastres (£115 million at the black rate, which is four times the official rate) after American aid has been taken into account. So there is little economic strength to support the war effort, or carry out rural development, unless there is more American aid. Luckily, General Lansdale saw the importance of rural development years ago.



Marshal Ky at target practice; wanted, a civilian

There has been a great deal of talk among senior Vietnamese officials about the need to "win the peasant's heart." So far, it has all remained pretty academic. The peasants have got the worst deal of the whole war: bloodsucking officials and pitiless Vietcong tax collectors; forced labour; terror strikes by the Vietcong, and shelling and bombing by the government forces and now the Americans. If the peasants are to come over to the government side, they must feel and see that the government is doing something for them on the spot, in the countryside.

The Vietnamese owe a great deal to the Americans, but they are nationalists, and are sensitive to anything that smacks of "colonialism." And "colonialism" ranges from drunken marines in the streets to tactless American embassy officials who rub in too hard the truth about South Vietnam's utter dependence on the United States. General Lansdale has strong views on this. He is expected to bring his weight to bear in favour of Vietnamese nationalism.

The problems are staggering. It all turns on finding the right men. There are reports that General Lansdale has been shocked by the wastage of competent and honest men in the purge of the old Diem regime, and that he will push for their re-employment. But will they agree to come back? And on what terms? And what happens if the monks of the Vien Hoa Dao (the political arm of the United Buddhist Association) react to the reappointment of Catholics by calling on their faithful to "descend into the streets" again? General Lansdale's second search for a stable government in Saigon begins under a lowering